

Did you know that May is High Blood Pressure Awareness Month?
Kimberly N. Taylor, RN, BSN, CCM

Hypertension or High Blood Pressure means the pressure in your arteries is above the normal range. In most cases, no one knows what causes high blood pressure. Left untreated, damage to the heart and blood vessels is likely, increasing the risk of stroke, heart attack, and kidney or heart failure. High Blood Pressure is called the “Silent Killer” because usually there are no symptoms until it reaches a life-threatening stage.

Many people do not know what a normal blood pressure reading is, or why it is called the “Silent Killer.” There is truly no “ideal” blood pressure reading because each individual is different. However, there is a range of “normal” blood pressure. Blood Pressure is written as two numbers. Generally, a reading that is less than 140 over 90 (*written as 140/90*) indicates that you do not need to worry. If *either* or *both* numbers are equal to or higher than 140 over 90 for an extended period of time, you have high blood pressure or hypertension.

High Blood Pressure, the “silent killer, is so named because many people have the condition for years and never know it. Some individuals with high blood pressure never experience symptoms. Others may have symptoms such as changes in vision, headaches, or dizziness. Because you may never experience signs or symptoms of hypertension, it is important that you have a healthcare professional check your blood pressure and write it down for you. If you are an individual who has “uncontrollable risk factors” then it is extremely important to have your blood pressure checked.

Uncontrollable risk factors are those risk factors that you have no control over, such as age, sex, race or ethnicity. High Blood Pressure is prevalent among African Americans, middle-aged and elderly people, obese people, heavy drinkers and women who are taking birth control pills. It may run in families, but many people with a strong family history of high blood pressure never have it. Being overweight, eating too much salt, drinking too much alcohol, and not exercising are all risk factors that put you at risk and are within your control.

According to the American Heart Association, if you are a person fitting the description below, you should have your blood pressure checked.

- Have family members who have high blood pressure
- African-Americans
- Women who are pregnant
- People over 35
- Overweight
- Not physically active on a regular basis
- Drink alcohol in excess (>1 drink/day for women & >2 drinks/day for men)
- Eat too many fatty foods or foods with too much salt

- Use tobacco products

High Blood Pressure affects about 20% of people living in the United States and one-third of these people do not know they have a problem. The only way to tell if you have high blood pressure is to have it checked. Hypertension can be treated. Mild cases can be treated through behavior modifications like diet changes and increasing exercise. More severe cases require medications. See your Primary Care Provider if you have risk factors and desire to have your blood pressure checked.